

ONE CITY, ONE FUTURE*

THE HONORABLE RUTH MESSINGER

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THE HEADLINES of October 1989: not the good election news on November 7th, the victories for progressives and for choice, but the disaster headlines. An earthquake strikes the Bay area and every day we get headlines telling us how many people died. A tornado hits a school, Hurricane Hugo strikes, and again we know immediately how many lives have been lost. And then, after those disasters get the attention of virtually everyone in the country, they get our money. They get huge needed relief packages appropriated quickly at the state and national levels because there is a disaster.

But we have our own disasters. New York City alone, to be parochial, has lost more children under the age of 13 to AIDS than all of the people lost in this country in the hurricane and the earthquake combined. And there are 10,000 other New Yorkers who have died from AIDS, and we have more babies born HIV positive this year in the Bronx than those we have already lost in the entire city. We have to anticipate those of us in government, those of you in health communities, what we are going to do over the next decade, before the turn of the century, with 10,000 AIDS orphans.

The statistics get worse and worse. They don't quit. What doesn't happen is a response of anything like the same magnitude to the disasters that don't make the headlines—that are just as, if not more, inexorable, but that proceed quietly.

The question to which we know the answer but to which our governments apparently don't is don't we care as much about these children, those people, as we do about the individuals on the freeway? Are we going to show that we can also hear the cries of the people in our cities? Can we see that while many of these people suffer serious pathologies, some at the hands of government, they are also the people who have some of the answers?

I am in public office because I believe that we can do better as a nation and as a city in addressing these problems. It is time to stop doing business as usual. That is the mandate of the voters. We need to avoid the next social

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earthquake. We need to recognize it before it hits and take steps to avoid it. We must see that the fault line of our social earthquake are lines of race and class and ethnicity and age and gender. We cannot afford to let these lines split.

So, how do we become more of what we really know we are, one city with one future, one city that has to create a future that works for everybody or it is not going to work for anybody.

We have to develop integrated responses to our own ongoing disasters. We have to, at the same time, treat the sick, remove the causes of the illness, and rebuild the sense of community out of which we will have healthier individuals and healthier families.

That involves putting everything together. It involves working at the community or neighborhood level, starting small and building up. We must recognize that so-called basic municipal services, from sanitation to police to education to housing to health care, are interwoven. We must see the lights from which help can come, not only government, but the religious institutions, the community organizations, the private sector systems that can be urged to be helpful.

I want to interrupt myself here and make a comment with regard to *The New York Times* articles about the homeless. In some ways it is not encouraging for people at a thoughtful conference about this problem and the responsibility government had by creating it to read that people "don't like it." But the fact that people are saying that and the fact that *The New York Times* is now reporting this can be used by us as a lever to get more resources focused on the problem. The people whom *The Times* thinks are "the people" have the money and resources to make the difference. We need their help.

The articles are dismaying but sometimes they lead to the editorials that say, okay, the next mayor has to channel some more resources to solve this problem. Then what we need, of course, is a mayor, which I believe we have, who understands what the problems are, who knows that government has some role in causing them, and is prepared to think about how to turn some of the corners.

Let me give you a couple of examples very quickly of things where government has not paid attention and suffered the consequences and where we have begun to pay attention. One area which I have been involved with for 12 years is tax policy. Tax policy is in fact central to how people lost their homes in this city. We provided extraordinarily generous subsidies to luxury developers who were converting single room occupancy housing for market rate use. We paid for people to take homes away from individuals, and we

continued to do it way after we could point to the negative human consequences of doing it. Only slowly did we get some public policy attention to the fact that these tax giveaways were a cause of homelessness.

Amazingly, there was another article in *The Times*, smaller than the one I mentioned above, which also appeared this week. It reported on a study I tried to get the city not to do. I didn't think we needed to give any distinguished university, even NYU, any money to do research as to why people were homeless when we could use the money instead to help them get homes. But the study was done, and *The Times* reported that the city leaders found out, to their surprise, that the primary cause of people being on the streets was that they had lost their homes. So now they know that, too.

I am serious. I should have brought the article. I didn't. It really said that. To their surprise, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, job loss—a lot of other things—were secondary and tertiary to the real cause of homelessness. Now they know. They did a study. They spent \$300,000 of your money and learned what you knew. Homelessness is caused by losing your home.

It is interesting to note that, having destroyed a large number of the homes that a universe of mentally fragile and poor elderly and single individuals needed, we now have, even under George Bush, even from Jack Kemp, a housing policy that has begun to recognize that single room occupancy housing, with built-in social services of which we have examples throughout the city—is something that the federal government wants to fund because it will help to reestablish a social fabric for people who are otherwise living in your subway station or on my stoop.

Let me give you another example of how these things are interconnected, and are all part of community health that I didn't understand when I first got into it. I spent a lot of the last 10 years being an advocate for small business people and trying to protect them from losing their commercial spaces. I saw that as helping the business people and as helping neighborhoods because it helped them to retain their services and their local employment, but I didn't see it in a broader context.

Well, now I see, particularly in Washington Heights, that in some of the places where legitimate retail businesses lost their space, it has been taken over by drug dealers. So, with no city intervention to protect business and store owners, we end up with a serious drug industry doing business out of what used to be legitimate service store fronts.

A couple of other examples of solutions, of steps that advance community health. These are tiny things that we have done, that community groups show there is a way to rebuild.

It took three years, but we were able to get the Public Service Commission of the State of New York and the New York Telephone Company to turn off incoming service to coin phones that were being used by drug dealers as rent-free offices. We did not get drugs to disappear, but we won back some street corner life, some sense of additional safety and community for people who had been afraid to walk down some of those blocks or turn some of those corners.

We provided city dollars to allow young adults in East Harlem to renovate some vacant city buildings. The young people who proposed the idea lobbied the council and the Board of Estimate to get the funding. They have secured high school diplomas in the process, created not only homes for families but also temporary residences for what would otherwise be homeless teen-agers.

What you have to ask and what I ask all the time, is why aren't we doing 100 times as much of this as we are and why did we cut that project back 10% last summer? It makes no sense. Hopefully, we won't do it in the future.

There are a lot of other models and examples of health in the city I could talk about. The Nehemiah housing project works. It is the only housing intervention that creates double the number of apartments for which it is funded. It not only builds new units but its sales audience is people who live in public housing. So it creates two apartments for one. And this city refuses to give land to the organized church groups that want to expand Nehemiah because we decided that in every place they want to build we'd rather see buildings of higher density.

We have a new mayor. I think that will make a difference. We also have a new city charter that offers some additional opportunities to officials, including myself, to fund directly projects that contribute to the rebuilding of neighborhoods. And it has on paper a very different, potentially more democratic land use planning process that is intended to be community based. What I hope to do in the borough of Manhattan is devote staff resources to make the community-based planning process work.

It will not happen quickly. It is only going to happen if we all come together, if we understand these interventions must be integrated, and if we commit ourselves to weaving and reweaving our social fabric.

I look forward to working with lots of you on doing that.